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ABSTRACT

The history of Western social thought may be examined by focusing on the linkage between dominant legitimating ideologies and various institutional structures of the social formation. As society moves in the direction of postindustrialism, the development of a constructivist, rather than deconstructive, form of postmodernism is needed. Postmodernists should attempt to articulate a vision of possibility which connects past, present, and future, mediated by recognition of changing political-economic conditions, so that adoption of strategies of cognitive flexibility, situational analysis, multiple role identification, and ongoing adaptability are represented as civic virtues and the tools for economic success. Postmodernism is grounded in the identification of differences and critical examination of the basis upon which difference is determined. Teachers can create classroom conditions under which issues of cultural difference are analyzed. School leaders need to become educated in the process and practices of cultural politics, in order to insulate teachers and students from political discord that may interfere with core instructional functions. Educators are urged to use postmodernist tools of discourse and critical analysis, continue the search for alterative communities and connectedness, and participate in the ongoing political struggle to fashion social meanings under which all might prosper. (Contains 15 references.) (JDD)

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Rip-Tides of Ideology

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The Nature of Tides

The title of this paper is intended to suggest a metaphor. But in order for the metaphor to be effective there must be clarity with regard to the nature of tides, and of rip-tides. Of tides there is no problem, the water rises and falls four times each day consistent with the cycle of the moon. One may set their watch by the tides; they are a predictable force with a clear and causal structural explanation. Of rip-tides things become more complicated. Causal influences include the structure of the beach, the nature of normal tidal currents, and wind force and direction.

That portion of the beach which is visible extends from the dune line to the waters edge. Where sand and water meet there is generally a slight berm, a drop-off, of 12-18 inches. From the berm out into the ocean the beach gradually deepens for a distance of 15-30 yards or so and then becomes more shallow as the underwater beach forms a sandbar about 50-75 yards off-shore. As one continues to walk into the ocean the water becomes deeper and deeper still.

A rip-tide is a current of water that flows counter to the dominant tide. One may often see the presence of the rip by reading the surface of the water but the real power is underneath. Whether visible or not, a rip-tide can sweep you off your feet and out to sea. The rip-tide is most often formed through the combined forces of a rising tide, an off-shore wind, and a pronounced sandbar. The effect of wind and tide is to push water higher up onto the beach, which then becomes trapped behind the sandbar. The result is then two contradictory forces: one of wind and tide pushing water up the beach, the other of trapped water attempting to return to the ocean. If a portion of the sandbar were to give way, a release is created, and the trapped water begins to flow like a river, underneath and against the dominant tidal flow. The creation

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of rip-tides is understandable using structural explanations, but seldom predictable.

The Ebb and Flow of Traditional Ideology

Taking the long view of the history of Western social thought one may trace the changing linkage between dominant legitimating ideologies and various institutional structures of the social formation. During the feudal period, corporate forms of governance (represented by the church and the landed aristocracy) and agricultural based economics were supported by an ideology which may be described as Medieval Corporate Authoritarianism. This ideology served to maintain the status quo, offering order and security. The rise to importance of trade, first regionally and later across national borders shifted the balance of economic power away from the landed aristocracy toward traders and merchants. Thus began the brief Merchantilist period and later the period of colonial expansion, noteworthy here only in that the Merchantilist period created the conditions of altering dominant perspectives of the form of economic prosperity and allowed an exchange of ideas, a comparison of different customs and social relationships greater than had previously been generally known. The result was to give rise to that period we know as the Enlightenment; led first by the negative philosophers whose task was to search out and expose the structural and ideological weaknesses of the ancient regime and later to posit a new basis of authority located in reason and the individual. Variations in legal, instrumental and technical rational thought would give rise in the positive sense to the development of classic liberalism as the dominant social ideology and in a more limited venue to positivist philosophy and social engineering. Classic liberalism, positivism and social scientism would later combine in forming that ideology we call modernism, and modernism would serve as the ideological form supportive of advanced industrial capitalism.

Throughout the first part of the 20th century the structure of social relations embodied in industrial capitalism and the ideological forms represented by modernism were able to exist in relative symbiosis. By the 1960s, however, structural conditions were beginning to be altered. Within the political arena movements of civil rights, women's rights, the free speech movement on campus, Vietnam protest and the Democratic Convention, Woodstock and Watergate all gave rise to a pervasive feeling that things were not as sound, just and equitable as perhaps we had imagined. Moreover there was the sense among many that the institutions

of governance were not capable of acting in the best interests of society. Indeed, continuing patterns of voter participation indicate that many people have simply withdrawn while others engage in negative forms of restoration politics.

Within the economic arena, the late 1960s witnessed the beginning of the end of dominance by the goods-producing sector and the rise of the service sector (Johnston, 1993). Since the late 1960s, 90 percent of all new jobs created have been in the service sector. At present over 70 percent of the labor force is employed in services and the greatest portion of gross domestic product is generated through the service sector. Because patterns of income stratification is more bi-polar in the service than the goods producing sector, there has occurred a gradual decline in the relative portion of the middle class (3 percent during the 1970s, 6 percent in the 1980s). Dual income families are now common, and almost 80 percent of women of child bearing age participate in the paid labor force. While labor is working longer hours, at higher levels of productivity, real income has continued to decline. Most recently, business has adopted a strategy of hiring temporary workers; since 1990 as many as 20 percent of new hires are temporary workers (most often the young just beginning work careers). The long-term consequences of temporary workers on retirement and investment patterns, health benefits, and socialization to work are not yet known. In essence, it does appear that in the span of only a quarter century the United States has experienced a Post-Industrial revolution as significant in degree and occurring in one-third the time frame of the Industrial Revolution of the previous century. Habermas (1975) was probably correct in asserting that the present was marked by perceptions of political (what he called rationality) and economic crisis.

At the ideological level, what began as a questioning of the hegemony of technical rationality and quantitative research led to the expansion and legitimation of hermeneutic, phenomenological, ethnographic and qualitative research traditions. Indeed, in the hands of such scholars as Feyerabend (1978) there is questioning of the rational basis of knowledge production. Postmodernism draws upon these, among other traditions, in representing a diffuse questioning, and often times outright rejection of the main tenets of modernism, while failing to develop a coherent ideological explanation and justification for emerging structural conditions of contemporary society. In essence, the argument I wish to advance is that during periods of social stability structural forces of accumulation and regulation, and ideological forces of

legitimation, tend to exist in a relationship of correspondence. Such was the case for example with industrialism and modernism. As the society moves in the direction of post-industrialism it is plausible to ask whether new, perhaps postmodern forms of consciousness need to be developed. I would argue that such ideological development is necessary, but that postmodernism in its contemporary forms has served only the important deconstructive function of challenging the dominant tradition of modernism, but has not yet developed to the point that it may provide a coherent and compelling vision of social possibilities sufficient to mobilize and sustain collective social action. That is, that development of a constructivist form of postmodernism is needed.

Over the past 10-15 years the majority of work within the postmodern tradition has centered on the original work of a handful of scholars, chiefly Lyotard, Boudrillard and Jameson, followed by numerous scholarly attempts to explicate what the "fathers" of postmodernism really meant and where postmodern studies might lead (e.g., Foster, 1983; Gitlin, 1989; Conner, 1989; Sarup, 1989; Ross, 1988; Harvey, 1989; Agger, 1990; Best and Kellner, 1991; Borgmann, 1992; Rosenau, 1992; Dickens and Fontana, 1994). Within these interpretivist studies a distinction is typically made between the early forms of postmodernism described variously as skeptical, deconstructive, cool, conservative, and negative and later forms described as affirmative, revisionary, hot, critical and positive. Given this history, I am far from the first to advance preference for a politically engaged affirmative and constructivist postmodernism. On the other hand when my students and I read these interpretive accounts (many of which are quite good) we remain more often struck by befuddlement than lucidity in determining "How can we use this stuff as we address issues of school practice and reform?" I am a simple man and need simple answers. Below is my attempt to produce an answer that I can understand.

A Simple Account of the Utility of Constructivist Postmodernism

In formulating a vision of constructivist postmodernism one must begin within the stream of ongoing consciousness. In this regard one thing seems clear. Given the general feeling of social uncertainty and anxiety, and mistrust of elites, and especially those "ivory tower intellectuals" housed in the university, any account of postmodernism that is not understandable

to the average reader of the daily newspaper is not likely to enjoy widespread appeal, nor alter existing world views and practices. In that view I wish to offer the following propositions.

- **Most people would prefer that schools improve without the necessity of changing anything. If there must be change, then most people would prefer that somebody other than themselves experience the change. If change is unavoidable and is to be personally experienced then most people would prefer some assurance that the pay-off is worth the effort and that the stages of change have been anticipated and that a strategic plan of response has been developed.**

Of course one of the lessons of history, and a core principle of postmodernism, is that even in the best of times and under the most stable of societies rational plans fail to produce desired outcomes, unforeseen events occur, unlikely heros and villains emerge, or as the bumper sticker declares "Shit Happens." While the postmodernists may be correct, and I think they are, that the modernist promise of order, control, stability and predictability is a chimera, neither do I see a mad rush by the public to embrace perspectives which promise ambiguity, uncertainty, constant change and unpredictability. Or said differently, much of the public seems to prefer a simple but understandable lie to a complex and ambiguous truth. So as good postmodernists what shall we do?

It appears to me that there is a fundamental difference in structure between theater and film. Theater presents discreet acts in a more or less coherent series. The story line may be present but requires that the audience engage in a constructivist act of imagination, integration, and interpretation. Film presents the story line in a seamless flow connecting past and present without the need for audience effort other than memory. Film continues to draw audience at movie houses, video stores and on the movie channels of TV. Theater often requires subsidies to survive. Postmodernism offers through the discussion of pastiche, collage, deconstructionism, simulacrum and the rejection of Grand Narrative a version of theater without the benefit of a coherent story line.

It may be advisable for the postmodernist to attempt to articulate a vision of possibility which connects past, present and future, mediated by recognition of changing political-economic conditions, so that adoption of strategies of cognitive flexibility, situational analysis, multiple

role identification, and ongoing adaptability are represented as civic virtues and the tools for economic success. Indeed within schooling there are already efforts underway in these directions. In North Carolina, for example, the state legislature has mandated "flexibility" in school organization, the pursuit of continual progress and change consistent with Total Quality Management principles, new forms of school level leadership grounded less on practices of bureaucratic management and more on development of positive organizational cultures. In this regard I think that it is not the message of postmodernism that is lacking, it is more a matter of packaging. I believe that core principles of the rejection of grand narrative, the freeing of individuals from the contraints of distal institutional constraints, the panorama of life-style choices (and the ability to change one's mind) all would likely find a ready audience if connected to the lived experience of ongoing events.

- **Most people do not like living under conditions of uncertainty and anomaly. Moreover, many feel a loss of community, connectedness, and personal efficacy. There is a felt sense that the world is spinning out of control, and lack of faith that political and social leaders have the answers. Whatever the promise of postmodernism, it must contribute to the development of a sense of community and connectedness.**

A core element of modernism is the privileged position attributed to habits of mind that may be described as instrumental- or perhaps technical-rational. The result of instrumental rationality is twofold. On the one hand it leads to the search for universal natural and social laws governing events. Thus, particular concrete events may be interpreted as mere illustrations of more abstract and universal principles. Persons may be described as "subject positions"; having once been socialized, enculturated and trained are expected to more or less unconsciously perform their structurally and functionally preordained duties. This logic is inherently alienating. On the other hand, within modernism simple means-ends analysis becomes privileged with the result that every event is believed to have a relatively simple and proximal causal explanation. In the case of negative events that befall oneself, self as a subject position/victim is not to blame, which contributes to legitimated denial of personal responsibility. Postmodernism offers a counter logic to instrumental rationality, what may be called the

substantive rational. In place of the grand narratives of science and universal principal is posited local knowledge and community narrative. Persons are positioned as agents rather than subject positions, with not only the power but the duty to interpret the relationship between desired goals and alternative means, always mediated however, through situational context and community values. In this sense one may not act unconsciously, decision is never simple, and both action and decision is always (potentially) political in the sense of representing either an affirmation or challenge to prevailing community values. Public discourse, in and through various discourse communities, becomes the means for developing and assessing shared values. And in the context of rejection of totalizing rhetoric, local narrative, which represents the story of our lives together told in such a way that plot, characterization and value judgement become integrated, becomes the primary strategy for developing the sense of community and connectedness the public longs for.

- **During periods of prolonged social malaise in which no simple and compelling explanation of blame is forthcoming the typical historical response has been twofold. One is to blame the schools for current conditions and/or failure to fashion an immediate remedy. The other is to retreat through a politics of restoration to a presumed Golden Age which often times is thought to be achieved through collective submission to authoritarian rule. The need during periods of social transformation, however, is for postmodernism to contribute to development of appropriate forms of educational leadership.**

One of the positive contributions of the 1960s was to debunk the myth of general value consensus in the United States. The solution, if not the basis for the problem itself, was located in the schools, in this case through addressing patterns of school desegregation and inequality of educational opportunity. At first we tried identifying the groups that had been disenfranchised from the American Dream, followed by a politics of inclusion. Multicultural education programs are the current legacy of this period, transformed somewhat as a result of the failure to achieve equity and inclusion following the poverty wars of the Great Society, now focused more on developing a positive sense of self-identity. While it may seem a poor bargain to abandon efforts to achieve equity and inclusion to gain only esteem, such a pragmatic strategy

was consistent with the dominant mood of the 1980s to take all that one could get. One difficulty encountered in the shift from a politics of inclusion to one of identity formation, however, is preventing a retreat from inclusion to identity from turning into a rout. In this case of preventing a politics of identity from degenerating into a politics of difference, ethnocentrism and Balkanization.

Postmodernism is grounded in the identification of difference, but more importantly, in critically examining the basis upon which difference is determined. More important still is that the postmodern concern with the basis of classifying difference is matched by concern with empowerment of groups which have been so classified. In this regard postmodernism moves beyond the current concern of multicultural programs with providing knowledge and information about different groups with the goal of increasing levels of tolerance, acceptance and self-esteem, toward empowering all discourse communities to engage in acts of self-discovery, structural analysis and meliorative collective action. One manner is which this may be accomplished is through combining strategies of postmodernist critique of dominant cultural ideologies with school and classroom level engagement with diverse groups. Within classrooms teachers can create the conditions under which issues of cultural difference, identity, and desires are one object of analysis, as are the various systems of ideological belief. The task of the class then becomes to write the story of the collective classroom experience; to fashion a narrative which respects difference yet remains inclusive.

At another level, as Ira Shor has described in Culture Wars, there is also a politics of retrenchment underway. If we cannot stop the flow of economic restructuring, or the failure of politics to address social crisis of poverty, structural unemployment, health care, violence, etc., at least we can attempt to impose our own meanings and interpretation of events upon the young. The culture wars are political in which is contested who has the right to define the meaning of things. These wars are being fought most directly over control of school board membership and classroom curriculum. Cultural wars are messy enough, but when the school becomes the site of contestation the result is often times curricular and pedagogical disaster. The likelihood of cultural politics entering the school is increased as many states adopt strategies of site based management, decentralizing responsibility from state and district to the building level. Under these conditions it becomes incumbent upon school level leaders to attempt to insulate teachers

and students from the process of political discord so that core instructional functions continue to be served. One means to this end is for school leaders to become educated in the process and practices of cultural politics, and in strategies of collective engagement. In this regard it may be useful to invite teachers, parents, students and community members to join in discussing and drafting the story of the school to be lived. The point is to develop a collective sense of ownership and commitment to the story yet to be lived.

Afterward

It does seem rather presumptuous to include an afterward to such a brief paper, but words like conclusion, discussion, implications don't seem quite right. I wish for a sense of closure yet find in the postmodern condition efforts toward the continual expansion of possibilities. I am left with the sense that never again will we be able, with a pure heart, to embrace modernism as an ideological movement, but neither am I willing to commit to post-modernism as we now know it. I don't want to achieve premature closure in the search for new basis of social thought and action. Perhaps postmodernism has served its historical function of deconstruction and we merely wait for the next Grand Narrative to guide us. In the meantime, however, using postmodernist tools of discourse and critical analysis, continuing the search for alternative communities and connectedness, and participating in the ongoing political struggle to fashion social meanings under which all might prosper, appear to be the best that we can do.

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